

Pet Snail and the Short Life of Ned

[Hebrew Original](#)

[Go to Reading Guide](#)

[Read an Interview with SmokeLong](#)

[Sam Vaknin](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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[Journal of a Narcissist](#)

[Malignant Self Love Narcissism Revisited](#)

[After the Rain How the West Lost the East](#)

[A World in Conflict and Transition](#)

1. Pet Snail

Nomi and I had a snail. We placed it in any empty ice-cream packing, on a bed of lettuce. We took turns spraying it with water drops. Morning come, Nomi would emerge from our bed, unkempt, disheveled, and sleepwalk to enquire how the snail was doing. She rejoiced with every black-rimmed bite, clapping her hands and drawing me to witness the tiny miracle. She replaced the perforated leaf with a green and dewy one about once a week.

At first, her minuscule charge concealed itself among the decaying greenery. Nomi spent hours, patiently awaiting an epiphany. Crowned with a set of dark, huge earphones that I bought her, she pounded her keyboard, keeping a lovat eye on the snail's abode.

When it finally emerged one day, the music stopped and she exclaimed elatedly.

Later that year, I was sentenced to a prison term. On the way home, courtroom echoes reverberated in the hushed interior of the car. Nomi said: "Let's go somewhere before ..." And I responded: "Let us go to Eilat, to our hotel."

"A pity the jazz festival is over" - she frowned. "A pity" - I agreed.

At home, an air of doom, we packed a hasty suitcase and booked the flight.

A thing I said reminded Nomi of the snail. She held its lair in both her hands and placed it accusingly on the glass top table in the living room.

"What shall we do with it?"

"Let's leave it enough water and food for a whole week." - I suggested - "His needs are few, he is so teeny, so I don't think there'll be a problem."

Nomi secured an errant golden curl behind her ear: "You sure?" I was and so we entombed him beneath some salad leaves and showered him with water and Nomi giggled: "To him it's rain". Then she grew serious.

It was an early morning. Nomi felt my swollen eyelids, pausing her finger on the protruding veins. On the way to the elevator, she stopped, unloaded a laden rucksack and hurried to the entrance door, wildly rummaging for the keys in her multicolored purse. She returned to me, flushing and panting and uttered: "It is fine!" "It climbed through some lettuce sprouts" - she reported. Her morning voice was moist and hoarse, Edith Piaf-like. I cast a virile hand over her shoulder and guided her outside.

We spent four days in Eilat. We slept a lot and swam the pools, among the waterfalls and artificial rocks. My sister happened to be staying there with her newly-minted family. But it was already chilly and autumnal and, four nights later, we decided to return. My imminent incarceration loomed and Nomi was atypically broody. I tried to comfort her, thinking what a consummate liar I have become.

When we reached home, Nomi dumped her suitcase, precariously balanced on its two hind wheels. I heard the metallic clinking of unfurled bolts and she was gone. A minute or two later: "I can't find it!" and then "It is not here, Sam!"

We cautiously separated one gnawed leaf from another. We studied the inside of the box and its immediate neighborhood, the marble counter. The snail was nowhere to be found.

Nomi was restless for the remainder of that day. Down hill, at a crossroad, concealed behind a gas station, stood an intimate French restaurant. It was our crisis eatery, a refuge of self-administered great wines and nouvelle cuisine. But today its charms failed. Nomi was crestfallen throughout dinner. She sat and gestured and chewed the food mechanically.

Still, ever so practical, faced with numerous arrangements before my disappearance, she recovered. But she refused to discard the now orphaned container and she made sure the leaves were always fresh and glistening. She thought that I didn't notice how she inspected the box, hoping to find her snail in it, revenant.

"It must be bigger now" - she sighed and then - "Today I plan to clean the entire house. It is your last weekend here."

On cue, I went to the public library and spent a good few hours reading Kafka's "Metamorphosis", a story about a respectable clerk turned loathsome insect in his sleep.

We used to clean the house together, Nomi and I. She would sluice the floor and I would dust, scrub the bathrooms and the kitchen. It was one of the last things we did together. And then it, too, stopped.

The afternoon was muggy and I walked home, immersed in thought. I found Nomi slouched on an armchair, surrounded by heaps of furniture and bundled carpets. Her face wore tearful makeup, her eyes were distant, and her hair bedraggled. I upturned a chair and faced her, silently.

She pointed speechlessly at the general direction of the kitchen and then subsided.

"I stepped on it, I squashed it" - and added frantically - "I didn't mean to! It is still so small and I don't know how it made it to that corner!"

"It must have climbed the refrigerator and descended to the floor" - I ventured. She signalled me to keep away.

"I had to clean the house because of you, because you are going" - in an accusatory tone.

I didn't know how to respond, so I tiptoed to the kitchen and contemplated the mess of snail and concha on the floor.

"Shall I wipe it off?" - I enquired meekly.

"Now, I don't even have a snail" - tears blended with startled exhalations - "You will be gone, too! I thought we could fight the world, you and I, that we are invincible. But it is not like that at all! We can't even look after one snail together!"

"Are you mad at me?" - I asked and she snorted, part pain and part contempt. She scooped the shattered snail with a paper towel and dumped both in the overflowing trash bin. She froze like that awhile and then, as if reaching a decision, she deposited the box, replete with lettuce leaves, in the garbage can.

"I don't think I am going to need it. I am never going to have another snail" - she paused - "At least not with you."

2. Ned's Short Life

Lidija returned home all dusty and breathless, as was her habit ever since we have bought the apartment and she embarked on its thorough renovation, long months ago. Between two delicate but strong fingers she held aloft a transparent plastic bag, the kind she used to wrap around half-consumed comestibles in the refrigerator. Instinctively, I extended an inquisitive hand, but she recoiled and said: “Don’t! There’s a fish in there!” and this is how I saw Ned for the first time.

“He is a male,” – Lidija told me – “and Fred is a female”. In the crowded and smelly pet shop the salesgirl elaborated on the anatomic differences between the sexes. So, now Fred had a mate.

“Fred” is Fredericka, our first attempt at a goldfish. One of the handymen gave her to Lidija “to keep your husband company while you are away”, he explained mischievously. Fred grew up in a bowl and then graduated into a small and rather plain aquarium. I placed a clay elephant and a plastic, one-legged ballerina in it, but this unlikely couple did little to liven it up. Fred’s abode stood on the kitchen counter, next to a pile of yellow bananas, flame-orange mandarins, and assorted shrink-wrapped snacks. She swam melancholily to and fro, forlorn and lonely, toying with her own reflection.

A fortnight later, Lidija and I purchased a bigger tank. I filled it with tap water and dumped Fred in it. Shocked and distressed, she hid under a shell and refused to emerge, no matter the temptation. Hence Ned.

I knew next to nothing about new fish tanks, the need to “cycle” them owing to the absence of nitrogen-devouring bacteria, and the stress that all these cause the unfortunate inhabitants of my aquarium. I dumped Ned in the crystal-clear waters as unceremoniously as I did his would-be mate. But Ned – having graduated far worse aquaria in dingy pet shops – swam a few triumphant laps around the receptacle and then settled down to the business of chasing food scraps. Fred eyed him shyly and then joined him hesitantly. It was the first time she had moved in days.

As the time passed, Fred, a codependent goldfish if I ever saw one, excitedly clung to Ned’s bright orange tail and followed him wherever he glided. But Ned did not reciprocate. Far more aggressive than Fred, he deprived her of food, pursuing her in circles and leveraging his longer body and broader amidship to tackle the silvery female. All my exhortations and threats went on deaf ears: Ned would coyly slink away only to resume his belligerence when he figured I am out of range.

Still, every few hours, Fred and Ned would align themselves, as arrow-straight as soldiers on parade, and swing to and fro in unison in the currents, perfectly at peace, their delicate fins flapping regally and slowly. It was a bewitching, hypnotizing manifestation of some primordial order. I used to sit on the armrest of a couch, enthralled by their antics, monitoring who does what to whom with the avidity of a natural scientist and the wonderment of a child. Gradually, the susurrations of the air pump; the gentle breeze of bubbles; and the elegant motility of my fancies all conspired to calm my rampant anxiety. I made a living off the proceeds of books I have written about my mental health disorder and so was gratified to escape the stifling and morbid environment of my own making.

Then, one morning, I woke up to find the couple gasping at the shell-covered bottom of their tank, tail and fins streaking red and rotting away, bit by tiny and ephemeral piece. The magic

gone, it was replaced with the nightmarish horror that permeated the rest of my existence. I felt guilty, somehow threatened, imbued with the profound sadness that other people – normal people – associate with grieving. Reflexively, I surfed the Internet frenetically for answers; I downloaded a dozen books and read them; and I got up at all hours of the night to change the water in my Ned and Fred’s minacious cesspool. I woke up with dread and bedded with foreboding and so did my version of Fred, my Lidija.

Ned’s body was decaying fast. Fred continuously nudged him: “Are you alive? You come to play?” But, when she saw how serious his condition is, her whole demeanour changed. His swim bladder affected, his dwindling scales plastered with burrowing parasites, besieged by toxic levels of ammonia, Ned’s compromised immune system – ravaged by his cramped and foul apprenticeship in the pet shop – didn’t stand a chance. He wobbled pitifully. Fred stood next to him, still as a rock, allowing his sore body to rest against hers, giving him respite and the solace of her company. Then, exhausted by her own condition and overpowered by his much larger weight, she would swim away, glancing back sorrowfully as Ned sank and darted, staggered and careened.

Yet, Ned wouldn’t give up. His magnificent tail consumed, he still took after the flakes of food that drifted down the water column; he still toured his new home, leftover fins flailing, bullet-like body strained, eyes bulging; he still teased Fred when he could and Fred was much alive when he revived. They slept together, occupying an alcove that afforded them protection from the filter-generated waves.

As the days passed and I added salt to the aquarium, Ned seemed to have recovered. Even his tail began to show some signs of black-tipped resurrection. He regained his appetite and his territorial aggression and Fred seemed delighted to be again abused by a reanimated Ned. I was the proudest of fish-owners. And Lidija’s crystalline laughter reverberated whenever Ned’s truncated trunk ballistically caroused the waters.

But this was not to last: the salt had to go. The fresher the water became, the sicker Ned grew, infested with all manner of grey; shrunken; lethargic; and immobile except when fed. This time, he ignored even Fred’s ichtyological pleas. Finally, she gave up on him and drifted away sullenly.

One morning, I lowered a tiny net into the water. Ned stirred and stared at the contraption and then, with an effort that probably required every last ounce of his strength, he bubbled up, rolling over and over, like a demented cork, all the while eyeing me, as though imploring: “You see? I am still alive! Please don’t give up on me! Please give me another chance!” But I couldn’t do that. I kept telling myself that I was protecting Fred’s health and well-being, but really I was eliminating the constant source of anxiety and heartbreak that Ned has become.

I captured him and he lay in the net quiescent, tranquil. When his mutilated body hit the toilet, it made a muffled sound and, to me it sounded like “goodbye” or maybe “why”. I flushed the water and Ned was gone.

[*Interview granted to SmokeLong*](#)

Randall Brown, SLQ Features Editor:

Hey Sam! Congrats. We at SmokeLong Quarterly are thrilled to have you aboard. As Features Editor, I get the sincere pleasure of conducting the author interviews. Woo-hoo! So let's get it started.

Q. A truly original flash. Where'd it come from?

Answer:

Sorry to be pedestrian - but it is a true story. Those were the hallucinatory days that preceded my incarceration. Everything around me was disintegrating at warp speed: my finances, my marriage, my reputation. In the midst of this surrealistic mayhem, we had our pet snail. In hindsight, it was our last, doomed, attempt to re-connect, to hold on to a semblance of sanity and order and caring. But then the world intruded.

Q. Love the snail. How important is it in flash to have such a central image.

Answer:

The snail is a metaphor. It is us, Nomi and I. It is our life, crumbling around us. It is our helplessness in the face of a crushing and merciless reality. It encapsulates our dwindling trust in each other and our foreknowledge of the end of our relationship. Metaphors are economic ways of communication and, therefore, an invaluable literary tool.

Q. It's his fault. Of course. All of it. What chance for redemption does such a guy have in this world?

Answer:

It is all his fault. Nomi uses the snail to tell me how bitterly disillusioned she is. The aftermath of a shared psychosis and the pursuit of closure are, inevitably, never free of recriminations. Nomi believed in me, in my potential, in the invincibility of my intellect, in my ability to fulfill the promise of a better future for both of us. Instead, I ruined both her life and mine. Instead, I made her crush the snail.

[*The Irresponsible Narcissist*](#)

[*The Accountable Narcissist*](#)

[*The Objects of the Narcissist*](#)

[*The Cult of the Narcissist*](#)

[The Narcissist as Eternal Child](#)

Q. I'd love to hear more about your editorial role in the field of mental health.

Answer:

I am the author of [Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited](#). (number 1 bestseller in its category in Barnes and Noble).

The Web site "[Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited](#)" was, for many years, an [Open Directory Cool Site](#) and is a Psych-UK recommended Site.

I am *not a mental health professional* though I am [certified in psychological counseling techniques](#) by [Brainbench](#).

I served as the editor of Mental Health Disorders categories in the [Open Directory Project](#) and on [Mentalhelp.net](#). I maintain my own Websites about the [Narcissistic Personality Disorder \(NPD\)](#) and about [relationships](#) with [abusive narcissists](#) and [psychopaths here](#) and in [HealthyPlace](#).

You can read my work on many other Web sites: [Mental Health Matters](#), [Mental Health Sanctuary](#), [Mental Health Today](#), [Kathi's Mental Health Review](#) and others. I write a column for Bellaonline on [Narcissism and Abusive Relationships](#) and am a frequent contributor to Websites such as [Self-growth.com](#) (where I am an [expert](#) on personality disorders).

I served as the author of the [Personality Disorders topic](#), [Narcissistic Personality Disorder topic](#), the [Verbal and Emotional Abuse topic](#), and the [Spousal Abuse and Domestic Violence topic](#), all four on Suite101. I am the moderator of the [Narcissistic Abuse Study List](#), the [Toxic Relationships Study List](#), the [Narcissistic Personality Disorder Support Group](#), the [Psychopath and Narcissist Support Forum](#), and other mailing lists with a total of c. 26,000 members. I also publish a bi-weekly [Abusive Relationships Newsletter](#).

You can view my biography [here](#) and read about my work [here](#).

Q. What's going on at <http://samvak.tripod.com>?

Answer:

I wish I knew (laughing). My Web site contains well over 1000 articles and essays organized into disciplines: the study of [pathological narcissism](#), [philosophy](#), [international affairs](#), [economics](#), [short fiction](#), and [poetry](#). I write constantly. It is a form of therapy I guess. So, the site is expanding all the time. Talk about Frankenstein ... (laughing again).

Q. Fantastic work, Sam. Really.

Answer:

Thank you for this kind (though perhaps not fully warranted) praise. I am honored to be published by SmokeLong Quarterly.

Reading Guide

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

This part is meant only to provoke thoughts. It is not a substitute to independent thinking, criticism, and analysis.

Why does Nomi react so strongly to such a minor accident?

Why does she blame me for something that clearly was not my fault?

Nomi trusted me to provide us with a happy future. Was this a delusion, a shared psychosis? Did she really see ME - or an IMAGINED me? Why is she so bitter and disappointed?